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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the Competency Based Education (CBE) movement in a small Ohio school district, asking whether it represents radical change or reenforces status-quo social stratification. CBE was a product of the recent public demand for more educational accountability. It is a radical shift from traditional U.S. education insofar as it represents a move toward "sponsored mobility," the European model which uses testing as a screening device to determine which students should advance to the next educational level. Under the CBE system, regular testing determines which students need reinforcement or remediation in order to pass minimum educational standards. In Ohio, proficiency exams are taken for four different secondary diplomas. Surveys show both support and criticism for CBE by teachers and researchers. The theoretical framework of Talcott Parsons' sociological functionalism is contrasted with conflict theory. Funtionalism suggests that the system contains basically fair standards for educational advancement, and that CBE should equalize the U.S. educational system, reducing social class discrepancies. Conflict theory, by contrast, suggests that CBE would perpetuate social stratification. The document asks whether students who succeed under CBE come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and whether students who need remediation usually come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The paper offers an extensive examination of the literature, but draws no conclusions. The two theories will be discussed in an ensuing study, and nine hypotheses that will be tested for that study are listed. (TES)

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COMPETENCY BASED EDUCATION: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The 1980's may well be remembered as having some of the most sweeping educational changes in the history of the United States' educational system. The change that this paper refers to is an educational philosophy and program called competency based education (CBE). Many of the changes in the U.S. educational system are either a direct or indirect response by individual states to address the criticisms and suggestions by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), the Report on Secondary Education in America by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Boyer 1983), and the concerns expressed by laypeople and lawmakers that the U.S. educational system is in need of reform (Airasian 1987; Erickson 1985; Guthrie, 1981; Pinkney 1979).

The CBE movement marks a radical shift away from what Turner (1960) has labeled the U.S. educational system, that of contest mobility, to the European style called sponsored mobility. The basic difference is that under sponsored mobility, testing is used very much as a screening device to determine who enters the next educational level. The screening takes place very early in one's educational climb. With contest mobility early selection is supposed to be minimized so that all are given an equal opportunity. The students would have a wide array of options to reach the desired goal. With CBE minimum standards,

the options have narrowed and certain skills must be attained as indicated by test scores. The CBE movement has also led to exit exams required by certain states to receive a high school diploma.

This study will focus on the CBE movement in a small school district in Ohio involving 1100 students. Ohio has recently passed the Substitute House Bill 231 which will require students to take a high school proficiency test beginning in 1990 in order to determine the type of diploma issued (Ohio School Boards Association 1988; Ohio Dept. of Education 1988). There will be four differentiated diplomas in the state of Ohio. These will be explained later.

One of the primary goals of CBE is to hold teachers accountable for what they teach, and by testing the students at certain intervals throughout the school year, teachers will be able to determine which students need reinforcement or remediation in order to pass the minimum standards (Palmer 1983; Serow 1984; Guthrie 1981; Pinkney 1979). State-mandated testing is viewed as providing equality of educational opportunity because of the uniformity of the tests (Airasian 1987). Therefore theoretically CBE is set up to equalize the U.S. educational system. Social class discrepancies should be able to be overcome. Serow (1984 p.67) states that "proponents of CBE maintain that it will rectify prior inequities in the education of [minority students] by providing a basis for the diagnosis and remediation of long-standing academic deficiencies and by affording the incentive and opportunity for renewed effort and

improved achievement."

If the former statement is correct it would be a major accomplishment for the U.S. educational system. However the CBE movement may be a system that further legitimizes the existing status quo. This study gathers data that attempts to analyze whether or not the rationale behind CBE is justified. Questions that will be addressed are as follows: Do students who pass the CBE exams come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds? Do students who need the remediation come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds? Does the remediation work? That is students may take certain CBE exams three times in order to determine if the student has mastered a certain skill. Will students who never master the skill be from lower socioeconomic groups? If so, what does this mean for the CBE movement? Will lower socioeconomic groups be disproportionately represented in attaining the lower ranked diplomas? CBE test scores are supposed to be considered for promotion to the next grade level, andto help determine student career choices. Will students who are not promoted be disproportionately represented by the lower SES groups? What impact will the test scores have for students advised to go into college prep or vocational tracks and will this be social class related? If the CBE rationale is correct then the answer to these questions should be no. If the answer is yes then the words accountability and equality of opportunity need to be seriously questioned.

HISTORY OF COMPETENCY BASED EDUCATION

The use of standarized tests is not a new phenomena in U.S. education. What is changing is the emphais on testing for accountability of teachers, promotion for students, and guidance of students into various educational curriculums, although the latter has been accomplished through I.Q.scores. Standarized tests are viewed by the mass public as scientific and according to a recent Gallup poll in 1984 the American people trust the test results (Airasian 1987). Part of this public trust may stem from the trust that educators themselves place on standarized tests (Guthrie 1981).

The creator of standarized tests was Joseph Rice in 1897. By the end of WWI tests were available in almost every subject (Guthrie 1981). The rationale for the use of tests in the early or middle 1900's is very similar to the rationale for CBE. As Guthrie (1981) points out the reason tests were used was to build a curriculum that would reduce failures in school which were quite common in the early 1900's. The tests would point out different abilities in students and therefore teachers could adjust their teaching style accordingly.

Apparently the goal of these standarized tests did not occur as indicated by the recent criticisms of the U.S. educational system (eg. National Commission of Excellence in Education 1983). With public perception of the U.S. educational system at a very low level of quality, state mandated testing is viewed as a way to improve the quality of education (Airasian 1987). The CBE movement is a reflection of the demand for

accountability by the public and legislators (Guthrie 1981; Pinkney 1979; McDonough 1988). As Pinkney (1979, p.413) states, "CBE can and will help restore the lost faith and hope of the American people in public education." It is the people who are demanding the legislators to enforce a system of accountability on teachers.

Perhaps Robert L. Bel as cited by Pinkney (1979 p.416) best sums up the attitude or philosophy behind the CBE movement.

> "Minimum competency testing will not cure all the ills of contemporary education, but it will do much to correct one of the most serious of those ailments: It will help to restore concern for the cognitive development of young people to the highest priority in the mission of the school. It will motivate teachers to teach more purposefully and students to work harder to learn."

It is the former attitudes and the belief in testing that has led to the CBE movement. As a result of the above concerns Florida was one of the first states to mandate CBE. In 1971 Florida passed the Accoutability Act for minimum competency which called for students to possess basic skills and tests that would hold teachers accountable (Palmer 1983). By 1975 only a few states had mandated CBE. Within three years 36 states had legislated or mandated CBE (Palmer 1983).

The state of Ohio issued its mandates for CBE in 1983 (Ohio Dept. of Education 1983). The Section number of the Ohio school law is 3301-35-02 (B)(2). The law reads of follows:

> "Locally developed comptetency based education programs shall be implemented for English composition, mathematics, and reading. Pupil performance objectives shall be established for English composition, mathematics, and reading. Provisions shall be made for periodic assessment of pupil performance, including testing at least once in grades one through four, grades five through eight, and grades nine through eleven. Guidelines shall

be established for the use of assessment results for instruction, evaluation, intervention, guidance, and promotion decisions. Intervention shall be provided according to pupil needs. Written policies and procedures shall be adopted by the board of education regarding the participation of handicapped pupils in locally developed competency based education programs. Provisions may be made for exemption of individual handicapped pupils from the requirements of the locally developed competency based education programs. Implementation of competency based education in English composition, mathematics, and reading shall begin no later than the 1984-85 school year, with full implementation to be completed no later than the 1989-90 school year. Competency based education programs shall be reviewed and updated at least once every five years."

The latest edition to the Ohio CBE movement was the passage of Substitute House Bill 231 in July 1987 (Ohio Dept. of Education 1988) which calls for school districts to issue differentiated diplomas. The Ohio Dept. of Education (1988 p.1) calls this "a logical extension of competency-based education." To determine which diploma is issued students must take a proficiency exam. The four differentiated diplomas are as follows:

1. "Certificate of Attendance to students who successfully complete the curriculum of any high school, but do not pass the ninth grade proficiency test.
2. Diploma of Basic Competency to students who successfully complete the curriculum of any high school and pass the ninth grade proficiency test.
3. Diploma of Distinction to students who successfully complete the curriculum of any high school, pass the twelfth grade proficiency test and meet any other criteria established by the district board of education.
4. Diploma with Commendation to students who successfully complete the curriculum of any high school, pass the twelfth grade proficiency test, and meet any other criteria established by the State Board of Education." (Ohio School Boards Association 1988 p. 14).

As of 1980-81 there were only 9 states that had exit exams. By 1984 at least 23 states had them (Serow 1984). In

Ohio, beginning in 1990, to receive a diploma students must pass at least a ninth grade proficiency test (Ohio Dept. of Education 1988).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Class and CBE:

Certainly the literative is quite extensive when dealing with the relationship between social class and academic achievement. Socioeconomic status tends to be the number one predictor of school performance (Boocock 1980). The higher the socioeconomic status of parents, the greater the likelihood of school success. However as mentioned previously CBE is an attempt to equalize background discrepancies. Since CBE is relatively a new area in educational research the data is inconclusive as to whether CBE does what it is suppose to do (Halpin and Halpin 1987; Pinkney 1979). As Halpin (1987) stipulates, the research does not indicate what the best way to set standards for those who pass and those who fail. Some have argued that it is up to the teachers to make CBE a success or failure (Pinkney 1979). Serow (1984) states that "educational analysis" is mixed on what CBE will accomplish amd that the research is "fragmentary" concerning the impact of CBE on lower SES students. Some argue that the lower class will benefit the most from CBE (Gilman 1978; Popham 1981; cited by Serow 1984).

Some literature does show that lower SES students were "1/3 less likely to pass the exit exam on their first attempt in North Carolina" (Serow 1984, p.70). However after remediation

53% of the previous failers passed the exam on their second try. In Maryland 75% passed after remediation (Serow 1984). Perhaps remediation is working or as Serow (1984) points out, passing the exam may have something to do with having already taken it. Even so exit exams in most states have a 90% passing rate yet racial minorities are disproportionately represented among the failures (Airasian 1987). If the latter is true can CBE serve its purpose for all students? The purpose being that students possess minimum competency. However as the above indicates there is simply not enough research to adequately measure the success of CBE. The key to determining the success of CBE will be in analyzing the effect of remediation for lower income groups assuming that the tests can accurately measure certain competencies, a subject that will be addressed later.

Teacher Concern:

Two major concerns by teachers as pointed out by Jackson (1979) are as follows. First of all the pressure to have CBE is coming from those outside of education such as legislators and laypeople. Secondly if students are retrained and still receive an A is this equal to those who got the A on their first attempt.

Another fear by teachers is that the test results will affect their salary (Palmer 1983). Of course if accountability is one of the goals of CBE this would seem like a logical extension. Others have noted that teachers, school psychologists and professional associations view the CBE legislation as penetrating into their academic freedom (Guthrie 1981). Also

there is a concern that teachers will teach only for the test which some view as "unproductive." (Ellman 1988). One might question what is wrong with testing students on what has been taught. Of the teachers surveyed in Florida 50% said they teach for the test (Palmer 1983). What is unclear is whether teaching for the test is a negative or positive aspect of CBE.

On a more positive note, in the survey conducted by Palmer (1983) of the teachers in Florida, 79% believe that CBE benefits lower class students and the teachers were quite satisfied with CBE. However of the same teachers, 70% believed that the skills learned by students for the test are not retained.

Negative Concerns of CBE:

The major negative concerns for CBE center around three items. First there is the legal concern that the tests used for promotion and guidance decisions are invalid and work discriminately against lower disadvantaged groups. McDonough (1988 p.37) sums up the three major legal concerns.

1. "The statistical and conceptual validity of a test.
2. The adverse or disproportionate impact of a testing program or selection procedure on a "protested group."
3. The use of tests or selection procedures to violate an individual's or group's civil rights."

The second concern, although related to the first, is the complaint that the tests are not valid and do not deal with what should be taught (Ellman 1988; Swift 1987). Swift (1987) argues that test results fail to indicate whether educational reform is truly beneficial because the tests fail to measure things such as writing or reasoning ability. Ellman

(1988) states that it is hard to measure creativity and the tests deny higher levels of thinking and as a result courses such as literature receive less attention by teachers and students. In addition he believes that the construction of the tests call for students to master a skill by a certain date, and if they do not the student is considered deficient, which may have some detrimental effects.

The third area of concern is that the minimum standards might become the maximum (Airasian 1987; Swift 1987; Palmer 1983; Erickson 1985; Ellman 1988). Ellman (1988 p.52) states the following:

> "The tests have become so important that they have validated the invalid, discouraged creative teaching, ignored sound educational research, and replaced meaningful instruction with the lowest common denominator and most easily measurable aspects of education."

The criticism is that minimum standards do not allow for higher levels of thinking especially if the minimum becomes the maximum. If teaching is geared towards the minimum then there is a fear that adequate preparation for "college work and life" will receive a lower priority (Swift 1987). As a result of this concern some have called for "maximal competency tests" (Erickson 1985). Others argue that testing should be used as only one small indicator of success in school, not as the solution to school quality (Swift 1987).

Erickson (1985) believes the minimal acceptable scores might be set too low so everyone can pass which will not increase the value of the high school diploma. He may have a point when

one considers the difference between the U.S. educational system in regards to testing and the European educational system. The European testing design is so rigorous that 30 to 40% fail. In the U.S. the tests are designed in such a way that very seldom do more than 10% fail (Airasion 1987).

THEORY

From a macro scoiological perspective this study will approach the CBE movement from two contrasting theoretical perspectives. We will focus on both functionalism and conflict theory. The analysis of the data should determine which theory best explains the consequences of the CBE movement. For now both perspectives will be presented. The implications for each theory will be discussed in the conclusions.

Although the history of analyzing educational systems from a sociological functionalist framwork can be traced back to Emile Durkheim (1961) we will primarily focus on the contributions made by Talcott Parsons. Much of his perspective will be taken from his classic work titled "The School Class as a Social System: Some of Its Functions In American Society" (1959). While admitting that there are many functions of an educational system, the work by Parsons is used because it appears to be most relevant to the logic of CBE. Comments below should illustrate the former point.

Parsons is concerned with two primary roles of the school class, that of socialization and selection. It is the latter concept that we are primarily concerned with in this study. However both will be briefly explained. He writes, "the

socialization function may be summed up as the development in individuals of the commitments and capacities which are essential prerequisites of their future role-performance." There are two categories of commitments. First as a result of socialization one should be committed to the "broad values of society" and secondly one should be committed to the job one has to perform in society. Parsons separates capacities into two components. First one must develop the skills necessary to adequately perform a role. Secondly one needs to acquire "role-responsiblity" which means that one must have the capacity to interrelate with others of higher or lower status in the workplace. Clearly CBE is set up to help students develop certain minimal skills, to adequately perform a role.

The selection process is concerned with the allocation of adult roles. The dividing point for status differentiation is accomplished by those who go to college and those who do not. Early selection is made in elementary school. The primary factor that allows for this separation of those who go to college and those who do not is achievement. The greater rewards go to the higher achievers, first in terms of grades and then adult status roles. The school class then is to allocate and serve as a selection device for roles "required by society" and to ensure an internalization of the values of society so that members can be committed to their roles and can communicate and cooperate with each other (Parsons 1959; Demaine 1981).

The above theory is relevant to CBE because of the rationale for CBE. As was discussed earlier CBE is to set up

minimum competencies for adult status. Theoreticaly the tests are to equalize educational opportunity thereby serving as a screening device in regards to promotion decisions, allocation of various tracking programs, and the type of diploma issued. If the tests are legitimized by educators, lawmakers, and parents which our previous discussion did illustrate, then the internalization of this value will probably occur by the students and therefore accept their position in the status order. As Demaine (1981) states, the school class is to legitimize the "normative order."

The assumption with funtionalist theory is that the contest within educational systems for future adult roles is fair. Conflict theorists have long argued the system is not fair, that the educational system helps to perpetuate the existing stratification. However if CBE works through remediation then the functionalists may be correct in that the school system does serve as a screening mechanism for future adult roles and the screening device (testing) is fair. There should be no differentiation between the social classes in regards to who gets promoted, who gets certain types of diplomas and who masters various skills based on test results.

The conflict perspective may view CBE as another legitimizing mechanism used by the elites to further justify their position in society. To illustrate this point it is first necessary to explain the conflict perspective as it relates to the educational system.

Traditionaly the conflict perspective has been critical of

the U.S. educational system maintaining that the transmission of culture is just a powerful tool used by the elites that helps to control the subordinates (Mercer 1980). Conflict theorists would argue that the screening mechanisms are inherently unequal. Karier (1973) states the following: "...the ultimate tragedy is that the poor and disadvantaged come to accept their failure in a system of advancement which condemns them, and yet support that system financially and by subscription to the values projected by education" (Mercer 1980).

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that the "educational system is relatively powerless to correct economic inequality. The class, sex, and race biases in schooling do not produce, but rather reflect, the structure of privilege in society at large."

As a result of the above discussion the question becomes, is CBE another way to mask the existing stratification? If Bowles and Gintis are correct then CBE will not change a thing in the existing stratified structure. The belief in the testing system will further legitimize the ideology that it is one's own fault if he or she does not make the grade. The testing system may further legitimize the various academic tracking programs which may be social class related. If they are then the conflict theorists may be correct. If the awarding of the various diplomas are social class related this would give further credance to the conflict perspective. Predicting from the conflict perspective would simply mean that social class differences will not be overcome with CBE, in fact, the stratification may get worse with CBE being implemented. Some

like Erickson (1985)and the Ohio School Boards Association (1988) believe that lower class students will be less likely to graduate because of CBE programs. The key point of this from the conflict perspective, is that this will be legitimized by the elites, parents, lawmakers, and the students themselves because of the belief in the use of testing.

In conclusion of the discussion on theory, one of these two perspectives should be more correct than the other. The information gathered in this study should indicate which theoretical framework is most appropriate for CBE. These two theories will be discussed again after we analyze the data. For now we want to turn our attention to the actual hypotheses that will be tested for this study.

Hypotheses to be Tested:

1. Remediation will be positively related to social class background.
2. Scores on what is called the big test for grades 3, 5, and 9 in math will be positively related to social class background.
3. Scores for the big test for grades 2, 7, and 10 in reading will be positively related to social class background.
4. Scores for the big test for grades 4, 8, and 11 in English will be positively related to social class background.
5. Students who never pass the pupil performance objectives will be of the lower social class background.
7. Students who need remediation will be those in vocational tracks and of a lower class background.
8. The issuance of the differentiated diplomas will be social

class related.

9. There will be a direct relationship between social class background, I.Q. scores, tests scores for CBE,achievement tests, remediation scores and grouping or tracking placements.

10. There will be a direct relationship between social class, attendance, and remediation scores.

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